

# Twos of a kind, frayed knots, and double takes



BARBARA

“Out of many, one,” which in Latin is emblazoned over the eagle on the seal of the United States, is especially tough to parse during election season, when we slice and dice the electorate, and pit red state against blue. It’s at the core of conceptual artist Allan McCollum’s “The Shapes Project,” a clever and challenging subset of which, “Perfect Couples,” is on view at Barbara Krakow Gallery.

McCollum has for years thumbed his nose at the art market’s tendency to value unique works over multiples by creating huge numbers of related individual objects. For “The Shapes Project,” which he’s been working on since 2005, he has set out to design a single shape for every person on the planet -- these days, that tops out over 7 billion. Anticipating population growth, he has created a computer program that has the potential to produce up to 31 billion unique shapes, outfitted with a variety of swellings, corners, and cockscombs.

Shapes, of course, are not ideological, emotional, or afraid. It’s easy to conceive of them as one large group, which seems to be McCollum’s point - if we weren’t so prone to taking sides in order to define ourselves, we might be able to think differently about the human race and its prospects.

“Perfect Couples” comprises grids of his paired, painted wooden forms, arrayed according to color value. There’s a pastel grid, a dark one, a bright one, and more. Arranging them this way inevitable triggers comparisons. The pastel ones seem friendly; the bright ones shine like extroverts, commanding attention. The dark ones are moody and deep.

Look more closely, and each couple displays its own tension. How will that small, green, rounded cross stand up to the much bigger mauve shape that evokes a cartoon of a big-nosed guy with a comb-over, with which it shares a panel? Even as McCollum summons the idea of

every person on equal footing, hedemonstrates how easily we default to “us versus them” stories.

Suppose McCollum could distribute his shapes to everyone, worldwide, and each form became a personal avatar. Would people build alliances according to the likeness of their shapes? It’s what we do. It would be hard to break us of it.

By Cate McQuaid  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Allan McCollum  
The Shapes Project: Perfect Couples

At: Barbara Krakow Gallery,  
10 Newbury St.,  
through November 24th.  
617-262-4490,  
barbarakrakowgallery.com

KRAKOW GALLERY